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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses assumptions, purposes, obstacles and techniques of parent/staff interaction in a day care setting. Regular, goal-directed communication between parents and teachers can reduce the complexity of the environment children experience and facilitate their socialization. Why, then, do parents and teachers rarely communicate? Some barriers to effective communication are racial and class differences, staff attitudes about parents who choose day care, and attitudes about the roles of parents and child care personnel. Other obstacles are lack of societal support for day care services, lack of time to make shared decisions, the tendency of staff to monopolize information needed to make decisions, and the youth and non-parent status of many child care teachers. Techniques for improving interaction between parents and teachers include a shared belief in broad-based participation in child care and education programs, articulation of guidelines that set out formal decision-making procedures, organization of decision-making structures that are appropriate to the program's size and its members' style, and providing access to the facts and knowledge needed to make sound decisions. Further, parents and staff should be trained in skills needed for decision-making, parents' skills and areas of interest should be identified to establish a basis for parent participation, and informal activities that help parents and staff interact should be provided. (Author/RH)

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Parents and Staff: Sharing Program Decisions About "Their" Children*

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To most fully understand this paper, the reader should know that I view the problems and challenges of parent staff interaction from a variety of often conflicting perspectives. For several years I was a human service professional supervising after-school programs for children at a large urban YMCA. At another time in my career I was a parent organizer assisting lay groups to start their own (often maverick) child care centers. My latest role has been as a mother of a preschooler who attends a parent/staff cooperative. Wearing several hats has given me the advantage of comparing theory with the realities of both parenthood and teaching. It has also left me vastly confused and profoundly frustrated by the feeling that viable parent/staff partnerships are almost unattainable.

Despite the problems, however, I remain committed to the belief that good quality child care must include a genuine, collegial relationship between home and center. Thus, stating my frustration along with my conviction, I invite the reader to struggle with me to understand more clearly the assumptions, goals, obstacles and techniques of such a participatory process.

Assumptions

Two key assumptions undergird my absolute commitment to the concept of a parent/staff child care team. The first is that a major task of childhood -- especially in this transitional culture -- is to sort out the complexities of social relationships, values, attitudes, and feelings towards a diverse set of emotionally charged personal and social issues. Children constantly strive to understand love, war, sexuality, race, religion, disability, ownership, beauty, and the like. No experience in the young child's life is really free of this struggle. Even the most trivial seeming activity is often a vital expression of a cultural imperative or a contradiction. In Urie Bronfenbrenner's analysis of child care centers in the USSR and USA,[1] this socio-political content of child's play is made unusually clear. In a similar comparison of US centers to those in China, Ruth Sidel[2] sharply calls our attention to this often overlooked function of the children's program.

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The second assumption flowing from the first is that a child, attempting to sort out all these complex issues on the path to adulthood, will fare a great deal better if the key caregivers in his or her life are moving in complementary (though not necessarily identical) directions. Given the enormous differences in class and ethnicity of our population, this is not always an easy task. In my child's day care center, for example, the death of one of his classmates dramatically showed us all the great need we had for two-way communication. Welded together by their concern that the children deal openly with this traumatic experience, parents and staff stayed in daily communication, sharing what they had explained to the children and pooling observations of how different youngsters were reacting. The children were exposed to a variety of explanations of death, since there could be no complete agreement, but the adults supported each others' explanations and cleared up a great many distortions. This type of respectful two-way communication leads to the fulfillment of several goals for both parents and teachers.

The Purposes of Two-Way Communication

1. Both parents and staff can better understand the full range of a child's reactions by being aware of significant events in the child's life in the dual settings of home and center. Often, each separate sphere in a child's life reveals only one aspect of feelings. As a child sorts out the feelings aroused by the birth of a sibling, or a separation from a loved one, or stories of war and accidents, or instances of bigotry, parents and staff get helpful clues as to what is happening and what kind of help is needed from the significant adults in the child's life. This "sorting out" may occur in making a phone call to grandma or watching a puppet play at school. If adults in both settings can share the insights they receive from witnessing it, they all are helped to understand the child.

2. After more fully understanding how a child is dealing with issues, the team members -- parents and teachers -- share data and utilize their own particular roles to help the child work out some of the issues that defy easy solution. The nuclear family has tended to rob children of the panoply of significant adults that used to be available to them to meet differing needs. The staff member in a child care program can often replace those aunts and uncles who bring caring, but a certain amount of emotional distance, to the child's efforts. Similarly, when life at the program is not as congenial as it might be for a particular child, the parents, alerted to the problems, can provide a counterpoise and support the child in solving the problem.

3. Decisions about the child's life or activities that need to be made at the center or in the home can be built on the fullest possible information and can be interpreted by the adults in both spheres. Whereas parent/staff communication implies shared decision making in as many areas as possible, there are certain issues which must be decided by staff or parents alone. These decisions are most likely to be in the child's best interest, however, if they are based on information from all the significant adults in the child's life -- not just the ones who are making the decisions. Too often in this society, parents and teachers blame each other for children's failures. Yet the real failure is the lack of institutional support for shared decision making. Recent social legislation such as the

poverty act and the new special education act have recognized this false compartmentalizing of the child's life and have mandated that home and school collaborate. Child care programs have a unique chance to begin cooperation with the home that will set a tone for parents' future dealings with public school personnel.

Given the convincing arguments for parent/staff communication, why does it so rarely seem to happen? I believe that the soil in which many child care programs grow is basically infertile and the environment often hostile to this type of partnership. Thus, the frustration I spoke of earlier in the paper occurs. Before one can talk about techniques to enhance communication one must look honestly at barriers. Once identified, some of these are relatively easily resolved. Others, especially those generated by the socio-political system in whch we all struggle to survive, may remain enigmas. However, recognizing these barriers and becoming sensitive to them can equip a parent/staff group to deal with some and defuse others. Knowing the dimensions of the task, we may be more generous in counting our successes.

Barriers to Parent/Staff Interaction

1. Differences in race and class among staff and parents. A large proportion of out-of-home child care is provided to low income people (mostly mothers) under government funding. Several consequences flow from that arrangement. First, most state and federal funding policies require parents to prove either poverty or extreme physical or emotional hardship to qualify for subsidized child care. At the same time, the staff group is often recruited from college educated young persons who reside outside the community. Frequently, the staff, having the privileges of a "higher socio-economic status," have scant knowledge of the cultural patterns, life styles or child rearing practices of the parent group. Lack of knowledge may lead to prejudice. The professional jargon of child care may further widen the gap between parents and staff.

In many publicly funded programs, parents are viewed as cases or clients. It is assumed that there are serious problems in the home and that social workers or child development experts are needed to teach parenting skills. Although there is value in offering parents emotional and educational support, the assumption that staff have the "answers" to raising happy and healthy children is distancing at the least and profoundly untrue.

From the parent's vantage point, there may be assumptions that the higher socio-economic status and education of the teachers gives them a monopoly on information about the child and thus the right to make all the decisions. Familiar with the work of social welfare agents in many other parts of their lives, parents -- especially those who are poor and in the minority groups -- are often timid in expressing their feelings and play an acquiescent game.

2. Attitudes about the commitment of parents who choose day care. Even when differences in the class and race of the parent and staff groups are not significant, some staff members may unconsciously make negative judgments about those parents who choose day care even though they "do not have to work for the money." This is not surprising since many have

been taught, by some leading child development experts, that one-to-one mothering at home is still the superior method of child rearing during the early years. Accordingly, many staff members make the assumption that mothers who use day care are inadequate parents because they are not sufficiently interested in mothering. Such people make poor partners in the decision-making process!

3. Attitudes towards the role of parents. Added to some of the negative attitudes about "day care parents" are the ambivalent societal attitudes towards the role of parents. On the one hand, our psychoanalytic legacy places parents at the center of the child's life: the parent is the cause and source of all of the child's behavior. On the other hand, parents are often perceived as unfit. They are thought to be unable to be objective about the needs of their own children. Even if they have professional backgrounds that include child development insights, they are seen as unable to apply them in instances in which their own children are directly involved, as in a classroom situation. On the other hand, if they have little formal education it is assumed they cannot understand the complexities of child development. In the Head Start model, as in many of the parent education models, parents are seen as people to be taught, helped and oriented to child rearing. Rarely are they accepted as collaborators.

4. Attitudes towards child care personnel. The "just a mother" syndrome in society meets its match with "just a day care teacher." In the eyes of society, child care personnel are often thought of as not much more than "babysitters." In the hierarchy of educational roles early childhood education is placed at the very bottom of the status ladder. With each rung up the ladder from preschool teacher to graduate school professor, there is a corresponding increase in prestige, societal respect and fringe benefits, as well as in the ratio of males to females.

Many child care staff struggle against their "benevolent custodian" role and may subtly displace their feelings of rage onto the parents who are, after all, representatives of the general public as well.

5. Lack of societal support for day care services. Unquestionably, child care personnel suffer not only from low public status but even more dramatically from difficult working conditions and demanding work, coupled with small monetary rewards. The anger generated by this patently inequitable situation can often spill over into attitudes towards parent participation. This is especially so in private or cooperative programs. Here the parents, although perhaps paying a maximum percentage of their weekly salary, still offer inadequate financial rewards to staff.

In a set of relationships that should optimally be cooperative, an adversary stance can often creep in, especially at budget time when salaries and tuitions are being determined. Caught in a bind created by the larger society's lack of support for child care, parents and staff often play out a drama of borrowing from Peter to pay Paul. The result is all around discontent. At the best of times, parents and staff join together to lobby for more public funding for tax credits or other progressive child care legislation. But at the worst of times the feelings of being exploited can surface in both groups, causing miscommunication.

6. Lack of time to make shared decisions. Not having enough time is often given as a facile excuse for lack of parental involvement in preschool

or after-school programs. Obviously, if most parents are working or have burdensome responsibilities time is at a premium. If staff must work at other jobs their time is very tight also. In actuality, a program is more complicated and sometimes less efficient when parents are actively involved in decision making. Committee meetings, phone surveys, and so on, lead to many delays as well as to many vetoes of staff wishes.

Night meetings become inevitable if genuine parent/staff decision making is desired. This allocation of time is a problem for which there are few solutions other than a careful minimizing of meetings and increased attempts to get business done by phone, mail surveys, and the like.

When parents drift into a "let-the-staff-do-it because they seem to have the time and expertise" frame of mind, mutual participation shrivels up. If the staff wait for parents and the work does not get done there is much justified anger among and between the two groups.

7. The tendency of the staff to monopolize the information needed to make decisions. This monopoly of information is a problem in all programs. It is particularly acute when the staff has more education or training than the parents. Parents need all the background information if they are to engage in genuine decision making processes. Providing that information, however, is not only hard to do but also time consuming, and it requires a staff genuinely committed to the process. It is easy to drift into a situation where staff and director, because they have the expertise and are on site, make most of the decisions without parents ever being involved.

8. The youth and non-parent status of many child care teachers. Child care personnel are frequently young women who do not have children. This may make it difficult for them to separate the theoretical aspects of child development from the real life situation of parenting. As they spend many hours a day with young children, staff members often come to love and to understand children in a way that is different from that of the parents. At times the transient (though intense) nature of their involvement can leave the staff feeling frustrated with home situations that they see as counterproductive. Often staff experience vague feelings of competition and ambivalence in their dealings with parents. On their part, parents may find it hard to relate to the insights or advice of teachers whom they perceive as outsiders to parenting.

Techniques To Enhance Parent/Staff Interaction

Recognizing the emotional and institutional barriers that can hinder parent/staff decision making is the first challenge any child care group must face. But even after these roadblocks have been minimized or removed, shared decision making still may not happen unless an appropriate "democracy mechanism" is built. This mechanism is constructed from at least seven key ingredients.

1. An articulated and mutually accepted belief in the absolute value of broad-based participation in early childhood education or child care programs. Since shared decision making can often be a frustrating process, the belief that it is the only way a child care program should be run is absolutely essential. This belief has to be strong enough to buoy up spirits when only a few members attend a key meeting, when staff and parents argue endlessly over the same points, when a few strong people

monopolize discussions of necessary repairs and when new programs cannot be started until everyone has been heard from. This belief must be built on the assumption that parents (even if they falter, bog down, or abdicate) have the capacity and right to make decisions about the lives of their young children. The recognition that conflict, openly aired and worked on, can be enriching to a group, buttresses this belief. So too does a sense of humor, along with patience and capacity to take risks. Essentially, the effort must always be to improve the mechanisms of participation rather than the motivation and character of the non-participators.

It is especially important that new staff and parents know precisely what they are getting into when they start working in a participatory program. A contract that honestly spells out extra work hours, time for home visits or classroom observations, and number of anticipated evening meetings may scare off some people but is definitely for the best.

2. A set of guidelines that articulate the formal decision making procedures. Although by-laws, personnel practices, job descriptions and staff and parent contracts may appear needlessly bureaucratic, in the long run they are vital. Nothing dooms a center to confusion and tension as much as vague generalities about who does what and how it should be done. In hiring, for example, everyone needs to know who will recruit and interview applicants, and which body -- the overall membership, classroom parents and staff, or a specially delegated committee -- will make the final selection.

Even though parent-staff relationships may be very cordial when the program starts, when a dispute arises everyone needs to know exactly what the guidelines and regulations are: for example, how much maternity leave staff are entitled to and what the processes of staff evaluation will be.

Most importantly, parents and staff need to have a format by which they can give and take criticism and feedback. A formal mechanism can help to avoid the tyrannies of the grapevine and kangaroo court. This is especially important as the program expands and is forced to move from decisions made by the whole to decisions made by committees and individuals with delegated responsibilities.

Formal guidelines also protect shared decision making when a child care program is financed or given in-kind support from another, larger institution. Time and again small parent groups are digested whole by school systems, universities or social agencies that push them to adopt their standardized hiring criteria, holiday schedules and educational or political biases. Parents and staff are not likely to give up an evening for a program meeting if they know that all the key decisions have already been made by people far removed from the lives of the familes and staff of the program.

Finally, it is only through thrashing out and committing to paper the actual "how-we-will-do-its" that program philosophy and policies become real to everyone. If this process is accomplished in the life of a program, parents and staff can identify both issues that they agree on and potential "hot potatoes." If too many irreconcilable differences become evident it may be that this group has little chance of working together effectively.

3. Decision-making structures that fit the size of the program and the styles of its members. Since our society offers few structual alternatives to hierarchy, it is a challenge to devise broad-based participatory structures. Between the traditional director-run nursery school and the totally collective ethos of counter-culture groups, there lies an array of viable ways to hold meetings, solicit feedback and find roles for every member.

Decisions can be made in a wide variety of ways. Bulletin boards and telephone polls often avoid time consuming meetings. Short meetings can be held at members' homes or at pick-up and drop-off times. Some decisions can be delegated to staff and some to the parents and staff of one classroom; others require whole program involvement. Decisions delegated to different groups should not be done on the basis of their importance, but rather on the skills, time, convenience, and self-interest of the people involved. With careful thought, it is possible to reach virtually every parent when key decisions, such as hiring and firing, setting tuition rates, or making major curriculum shifts, are to be made. Some issues, such as designing a playground or coordinating a fundraising event, can be delegated to ad hoc groups.

Organizational structures, too, need to be assessed and redesigned as the program shifts in size, composition, and funding base. There is no one right way to share decision making; staff and parents need to realize that in their program, as in the world at large, some people have the skills, energy and interest to do organizational tasks while others dislike them and will face them with dread. It should also be recognized that dissatisfaction and desire for change are endemic in participatory programs. These must be interpreted as the signs of healthy experimentation.

4. The facts and knowledge needed to make sound decisions. In traditional, hierarchically organized programs, professional staff often monopolize most of the basic information needed to make decisions. This occurs in part out of happenstance, but often lack of confidence in parents' interest or capacity to work within the program is a contributing factor. The same situation can also arise in programs committed to shared decision making unless careful thought is given to dissemination of information.

Finding ways to transfer information from staff to parents requires a lot of energy. Most programs rely on frequent newsletters, dittoed handouts in parents' mailboxes, and bulletin boards that are current, easy to read and strategically placed. Telephone trees and a "buddy" system for new parents can facilitate feedback. When audio or visual taping equipment is available it is invaluable for recording program meetings, staff meetings and children's programs. Recordings can be used to fill in absent members and to help people critically evaluate their own or their child's interactions.

During the decision making process it is often difficult to ensure that all members have the necessary information to visualize all the alternative courses of action. To give members only a yes or no alternative is often to give them no choice at all. For example, before a major program is initiated, members need to be informed about other ways the money might be used, how similar programs have handled a like situation, what the current thinking among child care "experts" is. Visits to other programs or interviews with parents, staff or professionals can provide enough con-

flicting data to encourage informed, albeit provocative, discussions. Professional consultants who work with a child care program must be encouraged (and even taught) how to present plans with alternatives spelled out. For example, professional architects, accountants, or psychologists should always articulate the pros and cons of any position they advocate.

While the barrage of dittoed papers in a child care program can become formidable, cutting back on the quantity entails the serious risk of excluding someone from the knowledge that may be a key to his or her ability to make appropriate decisions.

5. The skills needed to make sound decisions. When one recognizes that most parents and staff have had little previous experience in running an educational institution, it is apparent that most will need some practice. Even the most sophisticated members may not have the knack of running tight, well-paced meetings. Many parents and staff would profit from workshops on how to set up agendas, run small group discussions, and the like. Often local colleges or agencies offer personnel who will share the tricks-of-the-trade they have developed. Before parents systematically observe in a classroom or staff visit a home, a brief workshop might help them sharpen their techniques for processing what they will be seeing and experiencing. Similarly, for members who have never had the opportunity to hire personnel, role plays in which members practice questioning prospective staff may reveal useful insights.

Few of us, staff or parents, have had much experience in the giving and receiving of constructive criticism. Continuous skills training in this -- a few minutes at the end of each meeting or an occasional workshop in the rules and techniques of interpersonal communication -- can be of enormous benefit.

6. The resources needed to nurture the participatory mechanism. Given the complexities of shared decision making and widespread participation, nurturing these processes cannot be an afterthought. Whenever possible, time should be provided for staff to ascertain the skills and interests of the parents and to ensure that they are appropriately encouraged and used. For these reasons, a parent coordinator would benefit the program.

In addition to staff time, program budgets must reflect support for the participation process by providing small stipends for child care during meetings, translation of newsletters and notices (if there is a non-English speaking portion of the membership), and clerical tasks such as updating the program's parent/staff manual and running off dittoed notices. A coffee urn and a few easy chairs are well worth their purchase price as they encourage staff and parents to informally exchange information. These provisions are also a concrete, visual statement that parent/staff interaction is as important as what goes on within the program for the children.

7. Informal activities that help parents and staff interact. Programs that involve a high level of participation have discovered that the glue that holds the whole participatory mechanism together is an evident concern with the whole person and the whole family. The burden of endless business meetings must be balanced by more social occasions at which people come to know each other. A used clothing and toy exchange, food co-ops, babysitting pools, parent discussion groups, and picnics and other outings

commit parents and staff to each other so that the program becomes a genuinely supportive factor in their lives. The bulletin board on which housing and job notices are posted alongside announcements of welfare rights, group meetings, and neighborhood issues is another visual demonstration that child care is not just for the educational or custodial needs of children but that a good center is like a family with all its attendant joys and irritations.

Conclusion

Given the overwhelming nature of some of the obstacles to parent-staff decision making, as well as the complexity of implementing the strategies that seem to be effective, one could be left puzzling why any of us bother (and bother and bother). The only answer I can give is that this process is, in microcosm, the same struggle we face in every arena of our lives -- our jobs, our love relationships, our government. To opt out of the struggle is to accept an awesomely empty future.

Footnotes

1. Bronfenbrenner, Urie, Two Worlds of Childhood, USA and USSR, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1970.
2. Sidel, Ruth, Women and Childcare in China, Penguin Books, Inc., New York, 1973.